

# The Scarlet Letter from an American Initiation Story Perspective

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**Abstract:** American initiation story plays an important role in the history of American literature. This paper briefly reviews the origin and general characteristics of American initiation story, and on this basis analyzes Hawthorne's classic work "The Scarlet Letter", which is a relatively early and relatively typical initiation story.

**Keywords:** Initiation story, Characteristics, Structure, Redemption of the soul.

## 1. The origin of American initiation story

In the history of English literature, the name of "initiation story" has not been finalized, because of the huge number of such novels and different angles, it is difficult to summarize its broad literary vision and aesthetic scope with a simple word. Mordecai Marcus said in the Journal of Aesthetic and Criticism, VOL,XIX,Winter, published in 1960:What is Initiation Story? He pointed out that there are two main categories of initiation story : one describes growth as the process of young people recognizing the outside world; the other as a process of recognizing self-identity and value, and adjusting the relationship between self and society. In the history of American literature, the initiation story of teenagers have always played a prominent position. They not only have many excellent works in literary creation, but also have their own independent position in literary criticism and research. Many American scholars, such as the famous literary critic Leslie FFillair, have noticed that most of the protagonists in American literature are young people, and they generally believe that this phenomenon has something to do with the young history of the United States itself. Individual growth, the growth of the country, the growth of the nation are intertwined, and the geographical boundaries and social paradigm have been challenged and broken through. Therefore, "growth", as a literary theme, has a broad metaphor for both American society and American culture.

From the perspective of cultural research, the real reason why make-up novels can endure in the United States is that young people in each era will encounter different growth puzzles in the process of growing up, and different spirits of zeitgeist provide different ways of thinking and solving paths for different growth puzzles.

## 2. The Characteristics of American Initiation Story

Looking at some typical initiation story that are generally recognized in American literature, Professor Rui Yuping has made several conclusions in her works, Research on American Initiation Story, which I think that what Professor Rui summarizes is very comprehensive.

2.1. The narrative of a novel must include the growth of the

characters. Most scholars

define the protagonists of the initiation story as "young people".

2.2. From the perspective of content, the initiation story have personal experience, and the characters gradually form and constitute the subject of the novel in the process of growing up. Growth means that the characters move from naive to complex, immature to mature, and have a clear self-awareness, which can coordinate the conflict between personal will and social norms, so as to complete the realization of self-worth to a certain extent.

2.3. From the perspective of structure, the narrative structure of initiation story has a certain pattern: innocent — temptation — leave — lost — test — lose innocent — Epiphany — know life and self. Of course, this pattern will vary in different novels, but this is the basic initiation story model. Professor Rui pointed out that the structure of initiation story is closed and a sign of growth. Sun Shengzhong, in The Paradox of Growing up: Awakening and Confused — American Initiation Story and its Cultural Interpretation, outlined the development mode of the initiation story plot: innocent — enlightenment — disillusioned the confusion of — awakening.

2.4. From the result, after the protagonist goes through the hardships of life, he obtains a new understanding of the society, the life and the self-improvement. This understanding must be the protagonist himself clear and skin-cut feelings. Only in this way can the protagonist really grow up, that is to say, the protagonist in the initiation story must be a dynamic character.

## 3. Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter

From the perspective of the history of American novels, the first writer to focus on the growth of young people, and to successfully perform through the novel form is Hawthorne. Hawthorne was a writer full of ideological contradictions, who grew up in the powerful Puritan New England region, and personally felt the shackles of the growth of young people, while his way of thinking and morals were deeply influenced by it. He is extremely annoying and deeply dependent, so his thoughts are deeply contradictory.

"The Scarlet Letter" is a typical atonement and initiation story, the English girl Hester Prynne married old Roger Chillingworth when she was teenager and Roger was older

than her. Roger was a deformed, eccentric old pedant, and spent most of his time in his study, before Hester said bluntly: "thou knowest that I was frank with thee I felt no love, nor feigned any." He did not marry Hester out of love, he knew himself "old as I was, and sombre as I was, and misshapen as I was.....", But he tried it anyway" for all mankind to gather up, might yet be mine." But he admitted "we have wronged each other, mine was the first wrong, when I betrayed thy budding youth into a false and unnatural relation with my decay." Then he decided to move to America, and asked Hester to reunite before he had everything packed up. But Hester hadn't heard from Roger more than two years, and she knew nothing about him, most people said Roger might have been dead. And Hester didn't have much love with Roger, so she was not sad very much. As time went on, everything went well. After that Young Hester in New England met young handsome knowledgeable priest Dimmesdale, every young man yearns for good love, the two of them are no exception, so they fell, immersed in good love, completely forget the secular imprisonment, things because Hester was pregnant and the thing was exposed. Under Protestant rules, their actions are adultery, which is a felony, and those who commit adultery wear red A-characters for their lives. In order to pursue a good life, Hester advised Dimmesdale to elope with her, but in order to save his reputation and work, he not only refused to accept Hester's request, but also advised Hester to accept God's punishment to save the fallen soul. Hester's husband Roger Chillingworth vowed revenge on the man who hurt him. The story revolves around discrimination, persecution, atonement and revenge, always asking: who is the real sinner? Hester bravely and openly accepted the punishment and humiliation, insisted on convincing people

by virtue, and never bow to the reality, and finally overcame the double torture- -the discrimination of the world and Roger's revenge. At last she gained a new self and personal dignity. Although Dimmesdale saved his position, but his heart is suffering, and because of Roger's revenge, he has been self-abuse secretly and introspection. He suffered physical and mental damage, finally he cannot bear the torture and choose to confess their crimes to the public, thus at last he obtained the soul of the rescue and spiritual self-renewal. They grew up both spiritually and morally through their atonement.

Hawthorne paid more attention to the young people in the novel, and paid more attention to human evil and soul redemption in the growth process of young people. And because he is in the era of puritan's strong influence, so his works have obvious religious care, however, his works to inspire the growth of young people still has positive significance, good and evil can be transformed, for the good road to rely on yourself.

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